

Courage, Dear Heart

Initial Intros:

Welcome everyone, and if this is your first time in the Chapel, welcome to what we hope will be a gentle and creative encounter with music, arts and spirituality for the coming weeks.

And firstly... has anyone been at the half marathon this morning running? Well, well done folks, we made it, that required some bodily courage if I say so myself! I might be a bit wobbly, but in this chapel, both wobbles and courage can go hand in hand.

I'm not going to go into much detail as you'll be hearing from me again shortly, but just a brief framing for tonight's creative offerings. We have poetry from Tahirih, an Iranian poetess and feminist of 19th century Iran, Rainer Maria Rilke with words from letters to a young poet, and finally the Celtic theologian John O'Donohue. The music and words tonight are chosen with this theme of courage, dear heart, in mind. So no more words from me for now, we turn to music, to Somerville choir who've had their first rehearsals this week, and to Will our Director of Chapel music.

Choral Contemplation:

Thank you Setareh, for opening up this contemplation with that poem by Tahirih, spoken in Persian and English. This is something we like to do in the chapel, to hear multiple voices and languages and to evoke the brave ancestors who have trodden a path before us.

So... before we dive into this Contemplation theme, a moment to consider the space we're in, which holds these programmes, us, the music, poetry, and faith in its multiple and diverse expressions. *A house of prayer for all people*. Like a chorus that the choir returns to, this phrase will be our continual refrain throughout these seasons and cycles of Contemplation.

So, this un-denominational Chapel, or as a Reverend and wise person recently remarked: 'the non-chapel chapel!', draws on Christian material expression, but as a matter of fact, is a place of imagination, learning and exploration of all faiths and worldviews. At least, this is what we hope

for the space, to be a house of prayer for all people, in practice. Perhaps also some solace amidst all we carry and face in the inner and outer world today, which is becoming increasingly complex.

So why and how is this a house of prayer for all people?

Well, in this space we evoke the ancestors both within and beyond the college walls, and you'll likely hear me or others speak of one Emily Georgiana Kemp, who was the Chapel's founder. Emily, a writer, artist, adventurer, spent extensive time in East Asia, particularly China, encountering communities and Chinese philosophies throughout her travels. Though Emily's vision of the Chapel was rooted in the Christian tradition (indeed, the phrase house of prayer for all people is quoted from the book of Isaiah), and is reflected in the material design of the space, she was nonetheless receptive to multiple worldviews including Chinese philosophies which tilted to a universalist vision. Some personal Chinese philosophical favourites which we lean into in this Chapel include: 天下大同 Tian xia da tong, *below heavens all are one family*, 和而不同 he er bu tong, *harmony in diversity*. So nowadays, we call on these early explorations of her interfaith work as well as her receptivity to multiple viewpoints and languages, to ground these programmes and offerings in an ethic of care, belonging and justice. This is not always easy task, especially in this socio-political ideological climate that we live in, but in this chapel, we try to be courageous too and to draw on the strength of our ancestors and those that have come before us, like Emily, like Tahirih, to bring this house of prayer for people to life into practice.

This is unashamedly a spiritual space, one founded on religious and faith-based principles, but expansively so. In this sense, we're somewhat grappling with spiritual and educational encounters, different from what we encounter in the classroom, the exams, the revision, the theories we learn. Here, we're dealing with *matters of the heart*.

Now, as a disclaimer, please know everyone that stands up here in front of this lectern, including myself, is sharing their own limited and human understanding of social reality and spiritual truths and principles, this is not a sermon. Rather, these programmes are invitations and offerings to contemplate different worldviews and ideas, and like with all texts and ideas and peoples you

encounter, it's good to weigh them up with own understanding, and to listen to your inner authoritative voice in these learning and creative encounters...

Why Courage, Dear Heart?

Where to begin with this Contemplation theme? And why courage, dear heart.

Well, we often try to grapple with this idea of embodiment in the chapel space, that we do indeed have feeling bodies, not just whizzing brains, which is so often what folks are praised for in this institution. I often feel institutions emphasis a sole reliance on our thinking heads, when in fact, hand over hearts.. we do indeed have a feeling heart, too. And for many folks, coming to Oxford doesn't always *feel like* a place of belonging, and we can often find ourselves in cultures where imposter syndrome, perfectionism and burnout are prevalent... I sometimes wonder if these cultures are reflective of what we've forgotten about our essential natures: we have feeling hearts sensitive to our environments and which in turn affect the state of our outer contexts too.

A Bahá'í quote that speaks to the relational nature of heart and environment says:

"We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. [A person] is organic with the world. [Our] inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of [a person] is the result of these mutual reactions."

Our hearts are relationally attuned to one another and our contexts. In Persian it is said: *del be del rah da reh* (thanks Dad for pronunciation guidance), from heart to heart, there is a path.

I wonder how we can clear the pathway so that we might feel this attunement to one another, and the life around us. I suppose, in this time of left, right, polarisation, violence and oppression, and deep abuse, I am increasingly drawn to language and peoples, communities and traditions, which centres the powers and qualities of the human heart as a way to walk on amidst such chaos. It's true that the title of this Contemplation is inspired by some of the wisest and spiritually grounded people I know, who aren't afraid to place their hands over the hearts, to take a breath

and to bear witness to it all, whatever that all might be, and to take steps, one day at a time. I think there might be a comfort in this, placing our hands over our hearts, knowing that we are not alone, but connected as feeling, responsive and receptive beings.

Courage dear heart, can then also be fortified by community, support and collective care and the connections we cultivate beyond the classroom.

Perhaps then through these contemplations and more, we are trying to cultivate a discourse of the heart that can withstand the different kinds of heartbreak we face in the world today, inner and outer. And as music, arts and poetry... are (in the words of a thoughtful teacher) 'anecdotal evidence of the heart' they substantiate this discourse, and call us into contemplating something perhaps a little bigger than the theories of our classroom and textbooks...

One of my favourite poet-theologians, John O'Donohue speaks of a kind of sanctuary in the human heart, a place of preservation and solace, free from wounding. He says:

"There is a place in the soul that neither time nor space nor no created thing can touch." And I really thought that was amazing. And if you cash it out, what it means is that your identity is not equivalent to your biography, and that there is a place in you where you have never been wounded, where there is still a sureness in you, where there's a seamlessness in you, and where there is a confidence and tranquillity in you. And I think the intention of prayer and spirituality and love is, now and again, to visit that inner kind of sanctuary."

Leading on from this...

I think the Chapel is heart-like and sanctuary-like in some ways too. It can embody depth, feeling, questions, music, poetry. It has a bodily structure which holds the intricacies of various creative offerings and life energies. My hope then, is that in entering this heart-space, you will have the

opportunity to centre this anchoring word *courage* in your contemplations, to place your hand over your beating heart, and to remember that we aren't just brain, but heart too.

Courage, dear heart.

End: Thank you everyone for joining us this week, and a particular thanks to friends and family, Habibis who have travelled to be here today and have helped with the smooth running of this programme and the half-marathon this morning. Also to our readers, Setareh, Reuben and Ava, who have lent their voices to tonight's programme. Thank you all. And of course, our choir and Will who have brought music to our hearts. Our organ scholars Alfred and William.

So with those lyrics of an open heart and open road lingering, our next stop along this road will be the Diwali Contemplation next week in collaboration with OICSD.

Until then, we turn to the organ! This time, the physical musical one.

Thank you everyone and rest well.

Dr Arzhia Habibi

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